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Shutdown ordered of U.S. Energy laboratories

By Kenneth Chang and Sandra Blakeslee

New York Times News Service

Repercussions from the loss of two computer disks at Los Alamos National Laboratory spread across the country on Friday as Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham ordered a halt to almost all classified work using such disks and other removable computer data storage devices at all Energy Department laboratories.

The shutdown, which begins on Monday, will idle hundreds of workers at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California and Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, N.M., the two laboratories that, along with Los Alamos, perform most of the research involving nuclear weapons.

Los Alamos has been at a virtual standstill for a week as its managers and 12,000 employees review security and safety procedures. On Thursday, the lab's director suspended 19 employees over security and safety violations, and on Friday a spokesman for the laboratory said 20 employees had taken early retirement in the past nine days.

In a statement, Abraham said that while there were no known problems at other laboratories, "We have a responsibility to take all necessary action to prevent such problems from occurring at all."

The order allows exceptions for high-priority research approved by Kyle McSlarrow, the deputy secretary of energy, who is leading the investigation into the lost disks at Los Alamos.

Before resuming work, laboratories will have to conduct a full inventory of data storage devices — including floppy disks, memory cards and removable hard disks — and review and strengthen security procedures regarding the devices.

The Department of Energy operates 59 research centers, of which fewer than half will be affected, said Jeanne Lopatto, a department spokeswoman. Officials did not estimate how long the suspension of work could last.

Outside experts doubted that the shutdown would cause any lasting harm if it lasted no more than a week or so. "There's no urgent weapon that needs to get into the stockpile that's being disrupted by this," said Christopher Paine, a senior policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council's nuclear program.

The data storage devices at Los Alamos are currently spread out in 2,000 safes. On July 7, officials discovered that two Zip storage disks were missing from one of them. Eleven people knew the combination of the safe, which was located in a hallway next to a soda machine.

Two other disks from the same safe were briefly missing. Two employees had moved them to another building without recording the move, a violation of procedure that led lab officials to conclude that many employees were disregarding security.

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